Cincinnati Art Museum and Cleveland Museum of Art Present Shahzia Sikander: Collective Behavior as Collateral Event of the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia

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Mid-Career Survey Traces Sikander's Lexicon of Forms over Three Decades and New Work

CINCINNATI and CLEVELAND, OH—February 1, 2024—The Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM) and the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) are co-organizing a major survey of Pakistani-American artist Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969, Lahore, Pakistan) to premiere at the Palazzo Soranzo Van Axel in Venice during the Biennale Arte 2024. A Collateral Event of the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *Shahzia Sikander: Collective Behavior* is the most comprehensive presentation of the artist's work to date, bringing together more than 30 works made over three and a half decades, including new site-specific drawings and glasswork created for this exhibition. *Collective Behavior* will be on view in Venice from April 20 to October 20, 2024.

For more than three decades, Sikander has been reframing South Asian visual histories through a contemporary feminist perspective. Working in a variety of mediums—painting, drawing, print, digital animation, mosaic, sculpture, and glass work—she reimagines the past for our present moment. Sikander emigrated from Pakistan to the United States early in her career. This gave her a transnational perspective, through which she examines diasporic experiences, gender, histories of colonialism, and western relations with the Global South and the wider Islamic world. *Collective Behavior* traces the evolution and expansion of Sikander's practice over the course of her career, which has been rooted in a recurring lexicon of forms, figures, and ideas.

Following the presentation of *Collective Behavior* in Venice, complementary iterations of the exhibition will travel to the two organizing institutions in Ohio: the Cincinnati Art Museum will share a comprehensive presentation of Sikander's work (on view February 14 – May 4, 2025), and the Cleveland Museum of Art will present a focused account of the artist's practice that frames her work in relation to historic South Asian artworks from the museum's collection (February 14 – June 8, 2025). Together, these three presentations offer multiple vantages for engaging with Sikander's remarkable career. The exhibition will be accompanied by an illustrated catalogue featuring scholarly and poetic responses to Sikander's work.

Collective Behavior is co-curated by Ainsley M. Cameron, Ph.D., Curator of South Asian Art, Islamic Art, and Antiquities at the Cincinnati Art Museum, and Emily Liebert, Ph.D., Curator of Contemporary Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

"We were honored to install Shahzia Sikander's beautiful commission for the Cincinnati Art Museum's Ancient Middle East gallery in 2021. Seeing her work in the historic setting of Venice will be an exciting moment for visitors to the Biennale and for our two museums," said Cameron Kitchin, the Louis and Louise Dieterle Nippert Director of the Cincinnati Art Museum. "We look forward to bringing Sikander from Venice to Cincinnati and Cleveland in 2025."

"*Collective Behavior* builds on the Cleveland Museum of Art's interests in both contemporary and South Asian art, the latter being an area of strength for our collection, which includes significant holdings of Shahzia's inspirational source material—paintings, as well as sculpture and decorative arts," added William Griswold, Director and President of the Cleveland Museum of Art. "This exhibition is an exciting opportunity to expand our work in these areas and foster global dialogues through Shahzia's conceptually and aesthetically rich artwork."

Exhibition Overview

Collective Behavior traces Sikander's ever-evolving explorations of gender, race, and colonial histories through her distinctive lexicon of forms. The exhibition brings together an exemplary selection of artwork from across Sikander's career, illustrating her distinctive iconography and continuous reinvention through the adoption of new mediums. The exhibition includes her breakthrough work *The Scroll* (1989-90), created for her graduate thesis project at Lahore's National College of Arts, which established her position at the vanguard of the neo-miniature movement. Encompassing the spectrum of her creative output from that career-launching work to the present-day, *Collective Behavior* also debuts new works by Sikander that respond to the architecture and history of the Palazzo Soranzo Van Axel, the city of Venice, and global histories of trade and artistic exchange.

Rather than proceeding chronologically, *Collective Behavior* follows Sikander's primary ideas and lexicon of forms and figures as they appear and reappear throughout her work. The exhibition is divided into three sections:

- **Point of Departure** explores Sikander's engagement with South Asian and Persian historic manuscript illustrations, demonstrating her roots in—and disruptions of—these traditions.
- **The Feminine Space** highlights Sikander's ongoing address of gender and body politics through a dynamic visual vocabulary that has evolved throughout her career.
- **Negotiated Landscapes and Contested Histories** surveys Sikander's responses to the complex histories of colonialism in South Asia and their legacies in contemporary language, trade, empire, and migration patterns.

Each section functions independently and in conversation with the others, mirroring the way that Sikander's motifs create meaning as discrete units and through their interdependence with one another—producing a commanding "collective behavior" out of previously isolated forms.

This is the latest of many collaborations—from commissions to exhibitions—on which Cameron and Sikander have worked for over a decade. Most recently, at CAM, Cameron closely collaborated with Sikander on *Caesura*, a monumental work in painted and laminated glass, inspired by the museum's collection of objects originating in the ancient Middle East.

"Shahzia has a boundless capacity for reinvention, which has repeatedly drawn me and many others to her work. She not only transformed South Asian painting histories by bringing this technique into dialogue with contemporary ideas and aesthetics, but also continues to iterate on these legacies and push her own practice in new directions, adding materials and mediums to her already expansive repertoire," said Cameron. "*Collective*

Behavior illustrates Shahzia's artistic innovations and fully considers the multivalence of her practice as an American artist, a Pakistani artist, a Muslim artist, a feminist artist, and a global citizen engaging with a disrupted historical narrative."

"Shahzia is one of the most influential transnational artists working in the United States today. She animates global histories with a bold vision that sheds new light on our current moment. Her perspective, shaped by her own experience emigrating from Pakistan and working as a diasporic artist in the United States, resonates with the theme of this year's Biennale, *Foreigners Everywhere*," said Liebert. "It is a fitting moment to give Shahzia this major international platform, where new audiences will be introduced to her remarkable work—and those familiar with her art will gain new appreciation for its depth and range."

Exhibition Catalogue

Shahzia Sikander: Collective Behavior will be accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue featuring scholarly and poetic responses to Sikander's work by contributors including Aruna D'Souza, Victoria Sung, Bhanu Kapil, and Fred Moten. The catalogue will be published by The Monacelli Press in November 2024 and is available for pre-order in Venice.

Exhibition Support

This exhibition is organized and presented by the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

This presentation is made possible through the generosity of the Terra Foundation for American Art, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and individual supporters Rebecca and Irad Carmi, and Lauren Rich Fine.

Generous funding for *Collective Behavior* comes from Sean Kelly Gallery.

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All exhibitions at the Cleveland Museum of Art are underwritten by the CMA Fund for Exhibitions.

Production by D.H. office.

More information about the exhibition is available at https://collectivebehaviorvenice.com/.

About Shahzia Sikander

Born in 1969 in Lahore, Pakistan, Shahzia Sikander earned her BFA in 1991 from the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, where she received rigorous training from master miniaturist Bashir Ahmad. She became the first woman to teach in the Miniature Painting Department at NCA, alongside Ahmad, and was the first artist from the department to challenge the medium's technical and aesthetic framework. Sikander's breakthrough work *The Scroll* (1989–90) received national critical acclaim in Pakistan, winning the prestigious Shakir Ali Award, the NCA's highest merit award, and the Haji Sharif award for excellence. The artist moved to the United States to pursue an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design from 1993 to 1995; from 1995 to 1997, she participated in the CORE Program of the Glassell School of Art at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Sikander moved to New York in the late 1990s and further developed her interest in deconstructing miniature paintings as well as questioning identity: what it means to not only be a practicing artist in the United States, but also Muslim, Pakistani, and female. Since 2001, Sikander has been creating digital animations, often on a monumental scale, alongside works on paper, murals, and installations. She has continued to experiment across media in recent years, creating sculpture as well as work in painted glass and mosaic.

She has been exhibited widely since the mid-1990s, with major solo exhibitions at Madison Square Park, New York (2023); the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2022); the RISD Museum, Providence (2021-2022); the Morgan Library, New York (2021); the Asia Society Hong Kong (2016); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2007); the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2000); the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (1999); the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City (1998); and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (1998), among others. Her work can be found in the permanent collections of many institutions worldwide, including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia; the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Sikander is the recipient of the Pollock Prize for Creativity (2023); Fukuoka Arts and Culture Prize (2022); KB17 Karachi Biennale Shahneela and Farhan Faruqui Popular Choice Art Prize (2017); Inaugural Medal of Art, US Department of State (AIE), Washington D.C. (2012); and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship "Genius" Award (2006), among many others. She is represented by Sean Kelly Gallery.

About the Co-Curators

Ainsley M. Cameron is Curator of South Asian Art, Islamic Art, and Antiquities at the Cincinnati Art Museum, where she is responsible for the acquisition, research, and display of the museum's South Asian, Ancient Middle Eastern, Islamic, and Ancient Mediterranean collections. She has extensive experience in curatorial practice, having previously held positions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the British Library, and the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, Canada. She has published, delivered lectures, and organized exhibitions that highlight the arts of South Asia and the Islamic world, exploring both historic and contemporary practices. Recent projects include *Women Breaking Boundaries*, a two-part, cross-collection exhibition that examined the museum's engagement with female-identified artists, and *Beyond Bollywood: 2000 Years of Dance in Art*. Cameron completed her doctorate at the University of Oxford, her M.A. from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, and B.A. at the University of Toronto. She was a Fellow in the Center for Curatorial Leadership's 2023 class.

Emily Liebert is the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Since joining the museum in 2017, she has curated and co-curated exhibitions by Nicole Eisenman, Liu Wei, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, Raúl de Nieves, Emeka Ogboh, and Laura Owens, as well as the group exhibition *Picturing Motherhood Now*. Liebert has expanded the CMA's contemporary collection through acquisitions of work by a diverse and global range of artists, many of which are featured in the current installation of the CMA's contemporary galleries, which Liebert led in 2021. Before the CMA, Liebert had positions at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas. Liebert's art criticism has appeared in *Artforum* and *Frieze*. She holds a B.A. from Yale University and a Ph.D. from Columbia University. She was a Fellow in the Center for Curatorial Leadership's 2023 class.

About the Cincinnati Art Museum

One of the oldest arts institutions in the United States, and the first purpose-built art museum west of the Allegheny Mountains, the Cincinnati Art Museum features a diverse, encyclopedic art collection of more than 73,000 works spanning 6,000 years. In addition to displaying its own broad collection, the museum conducts extensive research and creates and organizes several exhibitions each year. It also hosts national and international traveling exhibitions. Through these critical projects and art-related programs, activities, and special events, the museum contributes to a more vibrant Cincinnati by inspiring its people and connecting its communities.

The Cincinnati Art Museum is supported by the generosity of individuals and businesses that give annually to ArtsWave. The Ohio Arts Council helps fund the Cincinnati Art Museum with state tax dollars to encourage economic growth, educational excellence, and cultural enrichment for all Ohioans. The Cincinnati Art Museum gratefully acknowledges operating support from the City of Cincinnati, as well as its members. Free general admission to the Cincinnati Art Museum is made possible by a gift from the Rosenthal Family Foundation. Exhibition pricing may vary. Generous support for the museum's extended Thursday hours is provided by Art Bridges Foundation's Access for All program. Parking at the Cincinnati Art Museum is free. More information is available at cincinnatiartmuseum.org.

About the Cleveland Museum of Art

The Cleveland Museum of Art is renowned for the quality and breadth of its collection, which includes more than 63,000 artworks and spans 6,000 years of achievement in the arts. The museum is a significant international forum for exhibitions, scholarship, and performing arts and is a leader in digital innovations. One of the top comprehensive art museums in the nation, recognized for its award-winning Open Access program and free of charge to all, the Cleveland Museum of Art is located in the University Circle neighborhood.

The museum is supported in part by residents of Cuyahoga County through a public grant from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture and made possible in part by the Ohio Arts Council (OAC), which receives support from the State of Ohio and the National Endowment for the Arts. The OAC is a state agency that funds and supports quality arts experiences to strengthen Ohio communities culturally, educationally, and economically. For more information about the museum and its holdings, programs, and events, call 888-CMA-0033 or visit cma.org.

cincinnati art museum

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

La Biennale di Venezia
60. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte
Eventi Collaterali

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